

COPING WITH THE TRAUMA OF THE CERRO GRANDE FIRE

Each of us and all of our families have lived through a national disaster. For those of us living away from the fire danger, concern has been for our friends and co-workers and for the possible damage done to our workplace. For those of us living in the path of the fire who have lived through one or more emergency evacuations, our concern has been for our safety and the safety of our families, coupled with not knowing when we would return and what we would find. Most sadly, many of us have lost our home and possessions that can never be replaced.

In the aftermath of such trauma and upheaval, it can be difficult to feel normal and function effectively. Initially, feelings of shock, numbness, fear, anger, and grief may be present. Increased feelings of vulnerability often follow as we realize that our safety and security can be so quickly threatened. It is important to realize that each of us can react to stress differently. Some of us find it difficult to think clearly and have problems concentrating or remembering. Preoccupation with events surrounding the fire can make it difficult to control, or even to predict. Periods of relative calmness can be interrupted with unexpected sadness, anxiety, or anger. Physical reactions like sleep disturbance, appetite change, tension headaches, and fatigue may surface. Social patterns can be impacted. Some of us may need increased contact with others and need to talk about our experiences over the last two weeks; others may be more comfortable with less interactions than usual and have little need to talk about the events surrounding the fire. Interpersonal conflicts may surface or increase. These reactions are typically of short duration and are normal reactions for people following such an abnormal experience.

After a crisis, most of us experience an increased need to control what we can, coupled with a decreased ability to tolerate frustration when our control needs are challenged. From that tension, irritability often surfaces that can strain working relationships. What has been rewarding in the face of this disaster is to watch the community come together to care for one another. Mindful of the common but transient reactions we will experience and encounter in the days ahead, it is likely that the laboratory community will experience that same increasing cohesion. Knowing that each of us has done and is doing the best that we can will help to ease our transition through recovery.

In the interim, here are some practical things you can do to help yourself and others:

- **Talk about your experiences with people who are supportive of you;**
- **Remember other stressful times and how you managed those experiences;**
- **Allow yourself to experience feelings. Give yourself and others permission to express varied and fluctuating feelings. That is normal;**
- **Take care of yourself. Monitor your use of alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, sugar, medicine, and other drugs. Drink plenty of water. Rest and remember to do what you know relaxes you;**
- **Spend time with people you care about;**
- **Spend time with people who care about you;**
- **If you have a family, be with them when you are with them. Do not let work demands override supporting your family;**
- **Do something for others;**
- **Strike a healthy balance between remembering what has happened to you and the people you care about and taking control over what happens next.**

If stress reactions persist or increase with time and you become concerned that you are not functioning well, ask for professional assistance. Counselors at the LANL Employee Assistance Program can be reached at 667-7339. Your group management will soon have a list of counseling resources available to you in Los Alamos and the surrounding communities. Seeking counseling for yourself and your family to address this tragedy will not jeopardize your clearance and your status in any of the human reliability programs.